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Pooka: Radical creativity and the edge of perception.

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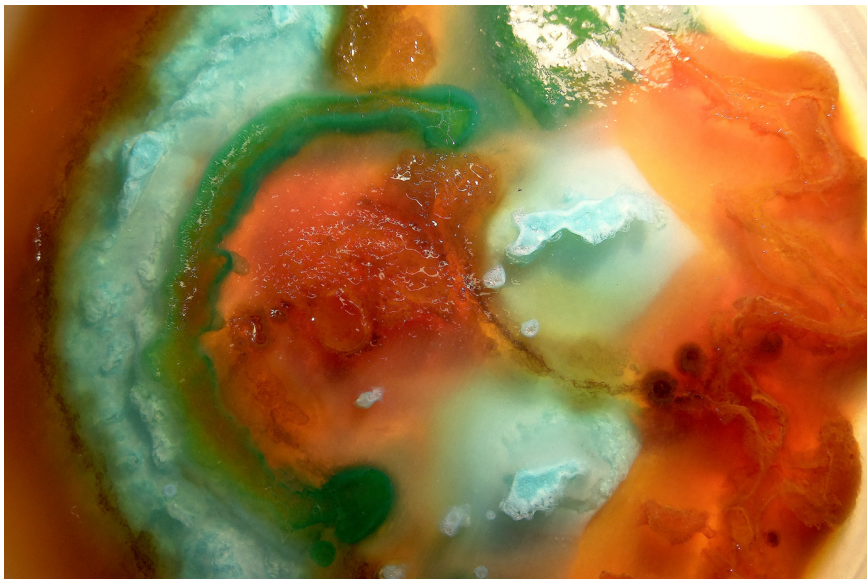
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Pooka: Radical Creativity and the Edge of Perception

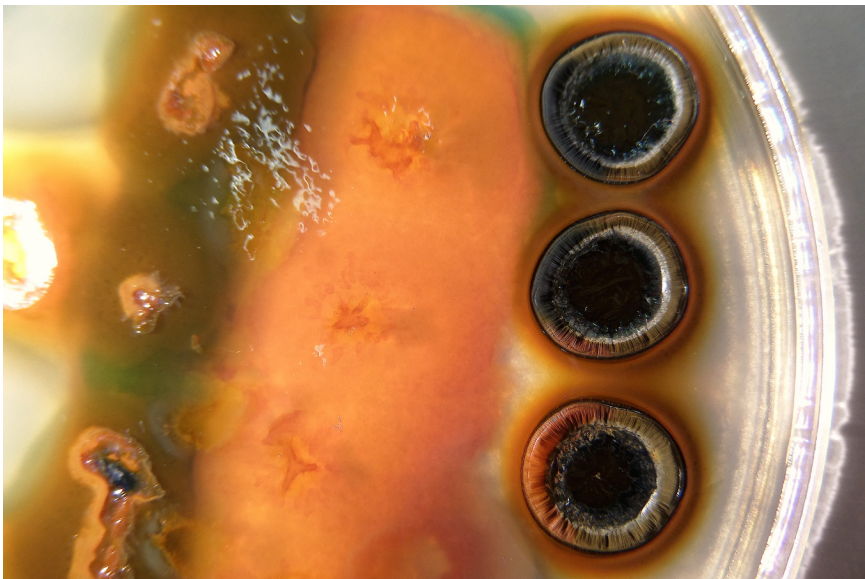
Rachel Armstrong



Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.
Philip K. Dick¹

As night falls in the Bog of Allen, which stands between two rivers—the Liffey and the Shannon—in Ireland, a tale of the pooka² is sometimes told around peaty hearths. The story starts with the familiar figures of a farmer—let’s call him Pat—and his faithful sheepdog, Rex. They’re down at the local pub after a long day in the field. Pat finishes his Guinness and whisky chaser, while Rex has been asleep under his master’s stool for most of the night. When the bell for last orders is rung, the farmer decides to avoid the rush of traffic and the habitual dance with the breathalyzing Garda lying in wait. Instead of taking the main road home, Pat turns down a lane that seldom sees a car. Although it is dark and densely lined by hawthorn trees, the narrow road seems a safe bet for a tipsy man who can get along perfectly well at his own pace, without the pressure of cars backing up behind him. Still, the track is treacherous. It is rickety and patchily tarmacadamed owing to the scars left by the swelling and fall of the bog, which has pried up potholes in its surface like a can opener. The now lively sheepdog obediently keeps pace with Pat, dropping just a little behind the farmer’s back wheel. And so they run together—dog behind man. The canny animal anticipates that at any moment, as the old man steadies his wheel around the dips, he’ll make a wrong call and come to a sudden, uncomfortable stop. Pat concentrates on the job at hand and at some point realizes that he can no longer hear his sheepdog panting. He whistles sharply and glances downwards to check on his loyal companion but, instead of a keen-eyed friend, Pat meets the glare of a hellhound—its snout curled back into a foaming snarl, coals glowing in its head that stare as menacingly at the man as Death itself.

Sometimes the story is told in foreboding tones whereby the unlucky farmer is never seen again. At other times, Pat lives to tell the tale since the pooka is



condemned to patrol a narrow existence plane that is bound by very particular geographical limits. Pedaling for his life, Pat sails over potholes and reaches safety against all odds, to be rewarded by the familiar sight of Rex waiting at home, wagging his tail.

In this modern age, ghostly tales are rationalized with the aim to sanitize them. Since the dawn of psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud helped us denude ourselves from perceptual confusion by homogenizing our mental experiences through analysis, rationality and logic. Carl Jung even persuaded us that dreams are not supernatural encounters but subconscious ablutions with hidden meanings and purpose. By applying objective and subjective analyses, muddy emotions can be stripped from our unconscious and provide diagnostic insights that may lead to corrective clinical behavioral measures—and contribute to the constitution of a collective notion of mental “health.”

The pooka may thus be rationalized as a state of alcohol-induced dreaming reflecting the violent tendencies of a farmer towards his dog, or perhaps it can be discounted as a simple perceptual error in the poor light. Objectively, the pooka may represent the conduct of a spooked dog, or even a collective cultural archetype that speaks of inexplicable accidents that take place down country lanes.

The modern age discounts the authenticity of such mysterious encounters because they cannot be empirically measured. It denies the possibility that uncanny occurrences may be real bodies with agency in their own right. Rather, it reduces them to the illusions generated by weak and troubled minds, or provoked by incidental sensations that are induced by subtle environmental variations such as air movement and changes in the visual appearance of a place. Given that our current theories of perception are based on a reductive view of our perceptual abilities, where sensory receptors detect “qualia”³ that embody abstractions of reality, it is unsurprising that our phenomenological accounts are far from complete.

1—
Philip K. Dick, *How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later*. 1978.
http://deoxy.org/pkd_how2build.htm.

2—
The pooka may also be known as *púca*, which is Irish for spirit, or in English it means “puck,” as in Shakespeare’s character in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

3—
“Qualia” is a scientific term used to indicate fundamental units of sensory experience.

Beyond biology, even our theoretical models of the world imperfectly describe our experiences, for we cannot stand outside our own existence as impartial observers. We are entangled within systems that we cannot fully perceive, so we are forced to navigate parallel conceptual realities and sometimes we get caught between the gaps that are unobserved—spaces invisible not only to our bodies, but to the very frameworks of our existence.

Reality always exceeds the limits of our imaginations, and there is plenty of room for slippages that challenge the certainty constructed around the modern world. I am drawn to the idea of the pooka, which embodies a “Nature spirit.” In Celtic and Nordic cultures such liminal identities are understood as shape changers that bring good or bad fortune. Indeed, the pooka symbolizes and perhaps even embodies the unique creativity of the natural world that Ilya Prigogine invoked in his provocative accounts of the directionality of time.⁴

At the start of the 21st century, Nature’s strangeness is at the heart of our analyses and observations. We are incredibly aware of its potency and turbulence though the phenomenon of climate change, which appears to have no fear of the modern world. Yet, despite the proliferation of reality frameworks that supplement the dominant narratives of the industrial era, Nature continues to avoid definition. On account of its restless material creativity, it cannot be reduced to any particular combination of definable entities such as technology, culture and ecology.⁵ By forming new hybrids and undergoing radical transformation, Nature is constantly spilling out beyond its definitions and evading being delineated or captured. In this sense, Nature is indeed a harbinger of both positive change—which can be appreciated in its fertility, resilience and generative novelty—and simultaneously an ominous force that can wield massive, unprovoked destruction, such that caused Charles Darwin to abandon his faith in a benevolent god. Yet in the modern world we understand reality to be made up of geometric objects that have particular properties such as mass and volume, as well as discrete, geometrically constrained borders. We have used this assumption to observe the natural world and in doing so, have reduced its potential to narrow, specific roles. If it is not relegated to a resource that can be consumed by proliferating machines, then it is seen as little more than a definable set of forms and functions. The radically disruptive presence of **the pooka cannot exist** within this classical framework as it eludes measurement or definition—and is therefore cast as a purely imaginary being and rationalized into nothingness, denying Nature its creativity.

With the rise of quantum physics during the 20th century, new life was breathed into our reality frameworks. Quantum physics could successfully explain a vast range of phenomena, including the nature of atoms, the formation of elements, how light interacts with matter and the evolution of stars. While it is scientifically grounded, quantum physics is based on a different set of theories to classical science. It engages with the material realm at miniscule scales, where paradoxical behaviors can be experimentally demonstrated. Owing to the inconsistencies in various models used to explain the weird phenomena observed, quantum theory

actually “carries in itself the seeds of its own destruction,”⁶ and truly belongs within the realm of the uncanny. In this context, the pooka exists as a material paradox—as a set of entangled subversive phenomena that are composed of very tiny material vibrations and dependent on the behavior of light. Yet, these phenomena can only be indirectly observed as functions of phantom and observer, and never formally verified. **The pooka is a Schrödinger’s cat.**

Systems theory and complexity science are relatively new models of scientific thought that have also developed over the course of the 20th century, and they embody the notion that reality is shaped from the relationship between things. The concepts are based on a philosophy of process that is realized through the organization of material hubs and assemblages of active agents, or bodies. In this context, **the pooka is not a single entity but emerges out of the fluid exchanges in an ecology of relationships.** These exist within the connections forged by matter on many scales—photonic flows, ethanol, uneven ground, a running dog, and an agitated farmer. At some point the generative creativity between the bodies reaches a tipping point and ruptures the steady exchanges to precipitate an irreversible event that changes everything.

My fascination for the pooka is provoked by an interest in the radical creativity of the natural world and the language frameworks that are used to represent it. Indeed, from a material perspective, our biological systems exist at interfaces where mind and matter are entangled. At the molecular level, we continually seek out adventure in new events, while simultaneously craving the comfort of familiarity. Our existence oscillates between boredom and terror, and the myriad states in between these extremes are dripping with contradictions, strangeness and poetry. They linger in the ripples of causality that trail behind us and produce traces that contain opportunities for transformation. These material shadows shape the mythology of places. Surely, no matter which lens we choose to observe the pooka with, it remains at the margins of reality. Yet, it can be called into existence through new narratives that renegotiate its relationship with the material world.

Around my grandmother’s giant cast-iron range, the pooka is reflected upon again and again—being more than a fey tale or an abstraction of Nature, but rather taking on the potency of a unique cultural construct. It is an agreement made between storytellers, who “swear blind” they know the truth of a tale and weave a unique existence for the pooka—to entertain, bewitch, or encode within it some deeply concealed truth. These **stories are in themselves shape shifters and an embodiment of the pooka.** They produce material effects by striking hope or fear into our hearts, and therefore inform our choices elsewhere—for instance, in taking a shortcut down a dark lane at twilight.

The light is fading rapidly and a figure is moving quickly and purposefully towards you. It is impossible to tell if it has two legs, or four. Black on black, the nature of this beast is beyond your apperception. While your retina shifts from full color to night vision, you can now hear the creature breathing heavily—and it’s too late to run.

4—
Ilya Prigogine. *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos and the New Laws of Nature*. 1st edition (New York: The Free Press, 1997).
5—
Koert Van Mensvoort and Hendrik-Jan Grievink, eds. *Next Nature: Nature Changes Along with Us*. (Barcelona: Actar, 2012).

6—
Adrian Kent. “Our Quantum Reality Problem.” Aeon, January 28, 2014. <http://aeon.co/magazine/nature-and-cosmos/our-quantum-reality-problem/>.